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The Teaching of English in the Smaller High School

By FLORENCE A. COOK

Principal of Shabbona, Illinois, High School

Truly English is the green carpet on the floor of every classroom in our schools, be that school one of five hundred or five thousand students. Treading upon this carpet daily are the young men and women of the tomorrows and their guides of today—all of whom know full well that all Life is Communication.

Whether one teaches English in a smaller high school (500 or less as considered in this paper) or in a larger high school (over 500), more of the problems are *alike* than *unlike*. Let us say that the *conditions* which exist in the two situations are quite different, though.

These two facts were evident in a small survey that was made of fifty high schools with enrollments ranging in size from 75 to 500 students. The English teachers who supplied the information were ones who taught classes of English 1, 2, 3, and 4, Latin, Spanish, speech; directed plays; and acted as teacher-librarians.

Seven specific and pertinent conditions are to be noted:

1. Because of increased and increasing enrollments, one finds all too often teachers who are not English majors teaching English classes.

Two apparently specialized problems are discussed in the major articles in this issue. In the first, Florence Cook, who teaches and serves as principal in a small high school, attempts to isolate the problems peculiar to English teachers in such a school. The second article is an analysis of the kind of English that a teacher can "get across" to underprivileged students, and raises the debatable question of just how different this English is from any other; the author, Morris Finder, knows his subject well, having spent several years in teaching large groups of the underprivileged in Chicago high schools.

2. Replies showed classes with widely varying abilities within the same class.
3. Some teachers complained of limited amounts of supplementary and drill materials.
4. Other teachers lamented the problems that developed because of inadequate libraries.
5. Smaller schools have difficulty in providing an enriched curriculum for students with special interests such as journalism.
6. In certain areas, as students arrive by bus and leave by bus, little outside-of-class help can be given.
7. Testing and diagnostic specialists are not within the school itself.

The answer to a number of the above conditions existing in the teaching of English in the smaller high school is to be found in the English teacher himself. (The writer is fully aware that the teacher is the key that unlocks the door to the solution of problems in larger schools also.) This teacher needs to be especially resourceful, for more often than not he has in his classes *the Deleenes* (those of below average ability), *the Melenes* (those of average ability), and *the Zelenes* (those gifted ones), and he must work with each and all according to the levels of ability represented within the class. He must have interests in many areas and avenues in order to cope with the problems that are sure to present themselves.

He needs to be aware of the various departments in his school, to seek the cooperation of his colleagues in being sensitive to the English that is being spoken and written in their classes, and to ask for their help in requiring their pupils to read, write, and listen well. Is it too much to ask of one's colleague that on each one of his tests *one* question be an essay one; that he help the pupils in his classes build and master a vocabulary that is peculiar to that subject; that he require correct spelling and correct, forceful speech in his classes?

The English teachers in the smaller schools must seek out sources for specialized help, for they are not likely to have them on the thresholds of their classrooms. There are numerous diagnostic tests available which are simple to administer and to interpret. Sample textbooks and workbooks will furnish material to supplement the work of the class textbooks.

County associations of teachers of English, district meetings of English teachers, state conferences of the Illinois Association of Teachers of English, and the conventions of the National Council of

Teachers of English are all rich storehouses and sources of inspiration and information for finding guidance and for giving assistance in one's problems. The publications of the State Association and the National Council reveal and supply answers to many an English teacher's questions and needs.

Can not English teachers guide students with special interests into activities which will afford them exercise in these special interests? The school newspaper and the annual may serve many purposes. Art expression is easily correlated with experiences in English. Schools are few indeed which are too far away from metropolitan centers to avail themselves of the best in drama and music.

When and where there are genuine needs and educational gaps in the English department in a given school, why hesitate to talk with one's administrator about the situation? Many a teacher laments an inadequacy but fails to share that regret with the *one person* who can ease and possibly even erase the inadequacy.

Now to those Teachers of English in the high schools all over our land today:

In spite of all that has been said and may be said in praise or condemnation of your teaching of "all the children of all the people," you are doing a good piece of work; you are earnestly, humbly, and steadily helping to keep and to improve the green carpet of English on the floor of every classroom in our schools and to make it one of better quality, one of richer content, and one of more lasting texture.

NCTE CONVENTION

This year's convention of the National Council of Teachers of English will be held near you—in St. Louis. The dates are November 22-24.

Plan now to attend this stimulating professional conference.

Teaching English to Pupils of Low Socio-Economic Status¹

By MORRIS FINDER

Mount Vernon Branch of Fenger High School, Chicago

All men by nature desire knowledge.—ARISTOTLE

The presence of underprivileged pupils in our schools gives rise to a major problem in public education. This problem is, essentially, the conflict between less-favored pupils (who comprise a large part of our public-school population) and the school, which is a middle-class institution.

There are two primary reasons for this problem. One is that schools are oriented toward the middle classes. Textbooks, standardized tests, and resource units are designed for pupils who have middle-class language habits and middle-class experiences. A second major cause is that the standards and values of middle-class teachers conflict with those held by underprivileged pupils. The teacher's understanding the reasons for the conflict is helpful. But this theoretical knowledge is not in itself enough to resolve the problem.

It is my thesis that this conflict can be mitigated primarily through the intelligent selection of learning experiences. For when pupil and teacher are engaged in interesting and worthwhile activities, the conflict tends to disappear. The well-selected learning experience bridges conflicting ideologies.

From my teaching of underprivileged pupils, I have inferred four hypotheses which have proved useful guides in my own teaching. I shall set forth these hypotheses and, in accord with them, make some general observations and specific suggestions for learning activities that pupils find interesting and valuable.

Hypotheses

The spark of human curiosity is in the underprivileged pupil as it is in everyone. The normal distribution of mental proficiency applies to the less-favored group as it does to other groups. My first hypothesis, therefore, is that underprivileged pupils, like others, can be taught. A large part of our problem is liberating their

¹ Adapted from a talk presented to the Third Annual Conference of the Michigan Council of Teachers of English, St. Mary's Lake, Michigan, March 19, 1955.

intellectual curiosity which is now too often stymied in our schools. We need right learning experiences to do this.

The experts, so far, have little to offer us on specifically what these right experiences are. Thus, my second hypothesis is that now we can start to build a suitable program for underprivileged pupils through teacher discovery of successful learning activities. We needn't be afraid to experiment in order to discover ideas. Indeed, I have found that an experimental activity usually is at least as successful as are many of the learning experiences in the orthodox English curriculum. And when we have found something that works, we ought to exchange, to pool our discoveries so that all who teach English may benefit.

A third hypothesis is that our subject, English language and literature, is sufficiently broad and all-inclusive to serve the needs and to stir the emotions of all. If this is not true, then how do we account for such generally-accepted phrases as "the richness and flexibility of the English language" and "the universality of literature"?

My final hypothesis is that success in teaching underprivileged pupils can invigorate the teaching of English generally. My experience with middle-class pupils indicates that their social conditioning may encourage them to learn in spite of a dull curriculum and mediocre teaching. But underprivileged pupils are less likely to be motivated and rewarded by others in their out-of-school environment for doing school work. To engage the attention of these pupils, the learning experience must have what *for them* is of interest and value.

I have found that if these pupils find a learning experience interesting and valuable, so will middle-class pupils. The following example indicates how there often is universality with respect to interest and value in learning activities.

A short story that appears in high school literature anthologies is "I Can't Breathe" by Ring Lardner. It is a clever story. But to appreciate it fully requires some knowledge of middle-class customs and summer-resort mores. When these are explained to underprivileged pupils, they may be informed but they are not impressed. They find the customs strange and lacking in significance for them. The reading and discussion of "I Can't Breathe" is, I find, only a moderately successful learning experience for these pupils. But judging from its readability, its at least respectable literary quality, and from the frequency with which it appears in school anthologies, I judge that "I Can't Breathe" is generally successful with middle-

class pupils. "I Can't Breathe," then, seems to have a limited appeal.

Ring Lardner's masterpiece, "Haircut," does not appear in any high-school anthology that I have. But I have found this story to be admired by all pupils. In "Haircut," vocabulary and comprehension difficulties are few. And one needs little critical acumen to realize that "Haircut" is superior to "I Can't Breathe."

I compare these two Lardner stories primarily to make three points: (1) that a learning experience that is successful in the slums may be equally successful among more favored pupils; (2) that this culturally-common activity may possess considerable merit and interest; and (3) that an activity that is successful only with middle-class pupils may sometimes lack the values that many more culturally-common activities have. It is upon this basis that I justify my hypothesis that success in teaching underprivileged pupils can invigorate the teaching of English generally.

Literature

The amount of good, published literature at our disposal is immense. What a publisher puts between the covers of an anthology that he calls, for example, "American Literature" is only a small part of American literature. A number of selections in an American literature anthology may be unsuccessful with an underprivileged group. It does not follow, however, that American literature is therefore unsuccessful with this group. We foster an interest in literature by selecting wisely from the vast body of literature. If we limit our choices only to those in the anthology, our program in literature may lack vitality.

Finding works in publications other than the school anthology at hand means that often it is advisable to read this selection to the class. It is a simple matter to plan this listening activity so that we foster responsible listening and liking for literature. And at the same time sheer entertainment, we hope, will be part of this experience. We need not apologize for using literature for sheer entertainment. Pupils need to be made aware of the satisfying entertainment value that literature affords.

If we assume that literature should be a pleasurable experience, it follows that it is unwise to use literature as material for reading remediation. Of course the necessary discussion of meaning in a literary work is practice in reading comprehension—as is the art of literary criticism.

A final comment concerns the wise choice of classics. To me it is no great tragedy if most of our pupils do not read works like

Twelfth Night, *Silas Marner*, and "Il Penseroso." Arnold Bennett wrote that a classic owes its existence to a small minority: the passionate few who are ardently devoted to literature. Certainly in any socio-economic group the passionate few is a small minority. Our problem here is to select works that capture the group's interest. For example, we can hold a class of underprivileged pupils with Suckling's "Why So Pale and Wan . . ." but we are not likely to do so with "Il Penseroso." A good practice is to use well-selected works of such writers as Robert Herrick, Jonson, Swift, Poe, Stephen Vincent Benet, Lardner, Jesse Stuart, Garland, Frost, and others. The chief consideration is wise choice.

Word Study

Word study has to do with developing an interest in words, learning about word parts and word origins, and learning to spell. But I shall discuss only two "word study" problems: first, what I call the vocabulary-building fallacy; and second, the teaching of spelling.

I am convinced that specific training in "vocabulary building" does not build vocabulary. You may recall Dr. Hook's statement:

Many studies have been made of the number of words in the vocabularies of students and adults. Others have demonstrated high correlation between vocabulary and intelligence, vocabulary and scholarship, and vocabulary and worldly success. The most famous of these latter studies, the often-reprinted "Vocabulary and Success," by Johnson O'Connor, showed that the largest vocabularies belong to big business executives. The research leaves one guessing, though, concerning the way that the grasp of large numbers of words was acquired. Did the executives take dictionaries and stop to learn each unfamiliar word? Did they go to schools where they were given twenty polysyllables to learn each week? Or did they learn words because they had broad interests, inquiring minds, and varied experiences?

Which came first, the chicken or the egg? Which came first, the vocabulary or the mind interested in things and in words to describe those things? Which came first, vocabulary or success? Did one have to come first, or did they develop simultaneously?

The last question suggests the answer to the others. All available evidence points to the belief that vocabulary grows as alert children and adults encounter new experiences. The thing and the name for the thing impress themselves simultaneously.

Vocabulary and a spirit of inquiry grow together; vocabulary and success grow together.²

Dr. Hook concludes, rightly, that rich vocabularies result from rich experiences, first-hand or vicarious. Underprivileged pupils generally do not read much; thus, they lack vicarious experience. An investigation shows, surprisingly, that these children tend not to venture beyond their home communities.³ Their direct experiences, therefore, are limited to their immediate environments. These meager experiences are reflected in their meager vocabularies. Impoverishment of purse and impoverishment of vocabulary generally go together. By giving them many opportunities to read, taking them on field trips, and encouraging them to partake of first-hand experiences, we help them to know more—and at the same time to know more words.

Poor vocabulary accounts partly for poor spelling. In underprivileged areas, we have little reason to make surveys of spelling deficiencies; almost anything we do will meet a multitude of needs. If anything is clear in the field of spelling research, it is that when spelling is taught, spelling improves. For interest and variety in the spelling lesson, I use a variety of methods: lists of spelling demons (*privilege, separate, occasion*), lists of words commonly misspelled because mispronounced (*arctic, February, chocolate*), and the study of those difficulties caused by faulty adding of affixes (*dissatisfy, drunkenness, unnecessary*). Then, too, there is value in teaching inductively a few spelling generalizations, commonly known as spelling rules.

It is as valuable to teach the spelling generalization concerning dropping final *e* in the English class as it is to teach the generalization "Heat expands most materials and coolness contracts them" in the science class. Each of these generalizations is best taught inductively and each, I think, is a useful concept for the pupil to possess.

Usage

Underprivileged pupils use substandard English. But when we teach speaking and writing, we are likely to insist upon their using standard forms. Teachers will find it helpful to develop a defensible and realistic position on usage. Our descriptive linguists have shown that good English is that which is appropriate, effec-

² J. N. Hook, *The Teaching of High School English* (New York: The Ronald Press Co., 1950), p. 365.

³ Eleanor Volberding, "The Eleven-Year-Old" (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Dept. of Education, University of Chicago, 1945), p. 44.

tive, and clear—useful concepts in guiding speaking and writing.

Indiscriminate attempts to make far-reaching changes in sub-standard language patterns are, I feel, unwise. When a teacher implies, however tactfully, that the language of a pupil, his family, and his friends is undesirable, that teacher is faced with a problem. Some would say that this problem stems partly from the teacher's having to play two conflicting roles. On the one hand, he is expected to play the role of a friend to the pupil. On the other hand, he is expected to be a judge of the pupil's linguistic behavior. Here the roles of friend and judge conflict. In his role as judge, the teacher threatens the ego of the pupil by threatening the language that the pupil uses in intimate family relationships, the language of his innermost thought and the language with which he expresses his confidences.

I, therefore, begin the teaching of usage with those items that pupils express a desire to know. Sometimes when I announce at the beginning of a period that the bell has rung, they question this usage. This is a cue to spend that period on principal parts of verbs. (Our course organization should be flexible—responsive to the needs of pupils,) We work on usage orally at first. Seeing in print *The bell has rung* makes little impression on them. Giving them many opportunities to hear and to say the acceptable form, however, is an effective procedure. It helps eliminate the strangeness first associated with the acceptable form.

The degree to which we can expect underprivileged pupils to use Standard English will vary from pupil to pupil. Those who are highly motivated or who are rebelling against their backgrounds are eager to learn the conventions of the middle-class language. What is readily taught to these pupils may be less acceptable to those more content with things as they are.

Conclusion

This paper has developed the thesis that the conflict between the underprivileged pupil and the middle-class school may be alleviated through a program of learning experiences that the pupil finds interesting and valuable. Bringing about this kind of program implies that the teacher needs a willingness to undertake classroom experimentation, and a willingness to rework much of the stereotyped English curriculum. Doing this job means, in part, surmounting the difficulties caused by our traditions, our middle-class texts, and our middle-class selves.

FROM THE PRESIDENT'S DESK

"How soon can I get these copies? I've found your *Bulletin* very helpful in my own teaching, and now that I'm head of a department, I want my teachers to have its help too."

"Here's that fabulous *Illinois Bulletin*. How do you people in Illinois ever do it?"

Until we heard such exclamations at the National Council meeting, Margaret Adams and I had somewhat taken our *Bulletin* and our association for granted. We had assumed that English teachers of other states were equally blessed.

That "How do you do it?" set me to thinking. First, a group of English teachers banded together. Then someone, often the *Bulletin* editor, suggested a project that would be helpful to English teachers throughout the state. A pains-taking committee organized the details of the project. Then all over the state, from Savanna to Metropolis, from Danville to Quincy, English teachers co-operated by sending in themes or names of authors or annotations or whatever was required. Thus another project grew out of the experiences of many to make richer the teaching experiences of all. Finally the *Illinois Bulletin* gave the results not only state-wide but also nation-wide publicity.

Do you remember the theme-writing project? Are you still using "Evaluating Ninth-Grade Themes" and "Evaluating Twelfth-Grade Themes"? Does your classroom have a map showing Illinois authors and the two issues of the *Bulletin* that grew out of the *authors'* project? What about "Books We Like"? Do your pupils have copies available for guidance when free reading or book report times are at hand? Then you have benefited by our latest projects.

Last fall our Special Projects Committee, headed by Alice Grant, was bubbling over with ideas, all of which seemed so good that we couldn't drop any of them. Consequently this committee split into committees as follows:

1. Human Relations in the Teaching of English — Wilmer Lamar, chairman
2. Annotated and Critical List of Materials Available for English teachers—Dr. Charles Willard, chairman
3. Survey of Teaching Load of English Teachers in the State of Illinois—Alice Grant, chairman
4. Ideal English Classroom and Arrangement of Department—Dr. J. N. Hook, chairman

With a zeal characteristic of English teachers, all of these committees began work. By March 17, when the Executive Board met in Chicago, all four committees had prepared mimeographed materials that require answers. All projects need a high percentage of returns to make their results valid. The question of priority arose. Would English teachers be willing to answer four questionnaires? Yes, we decided, English teachers would if they considered the results important. So we have four committees ready to spend the hot summer months tabulating your answers, and we are asking you to send those answers this spring as soon as you receive the requests for them.

Also this spring is a good time to send your two dollars to Dr. Charles W. Roberts, 204a Lincoln Hall, Urbana, so that you may receive the *Bulletin* next year and benefit from these new projects, which we hope will be helpful to English not only from DeKalb to Carbondale but also from Boston to L. A.

HELEN STAPP
Decatur High School
President

A WORD OF APPRECIATION

A nonprofit service organization like the Illinois Association of Teachers of English could not exist if it were not for those hard-working teachers who willingly add to their burdens by serving in various official positions without thought of any compensation other than the feeling that their work may be of use to the profession.

Guiding the activities of your I.A.T.E. this year are Helen Stapp of Decatur, President; Margaret Adams of Sycamore, Vice-President; Mrs. Helen Ellis of Rochelle, Secretary; and Charles W. Roberts of Urbana, Treasurer. Wilmer Lamar of Decatur during the past two years has been the very helpful co-editor of the *Bulletin*.

The District Leaders are responsible for maintaining membership in I.A.T.E., as well as for planning various district meetings and participating in the decisions of the Executive Council. The I.A.T.E. is fortunate in having a corps of loyal District Leaders who put the organization high on their work-priority list. They are:

BLACKHAWK: Barbara Garst, Moline Senior High School, Moline

CENTRAL: Verna Hoyman, Illinois State Normal University, Normal

CHICAGO: Alice Baum, 125 S. Humphrey Avenue, Oak Park

CHICAGO PAROCHIAL: Sister Mary Rosaleen, Mercy High School, Chicago

DU PAGE: Harold Griffith, Box 356, Wheaton

EAST CENTRAL: Mrs. Dorothy Colberg, 1003 N. Walnut, Danville

EASTERN: Eugene M. Waffle, Eastern Illinois State College, Charleston

ILLINOIS VALLEY: Isabella Sanders, Ottawa Township High School, Ottawa

MISSISSIPPI VALLEY: Mrs. Geneva Quinn, Rushville

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PEORIA: Florence V. Diers, Pekin Community High School, Pekin

ROCK RIVER: Mrs. Helen Ellis, Rochelle Township High School, Rochelle

SOUTH CENTRAL: Maurine Self, 1005 Edgehill Road, Jacksonville

SOUTHEASTERN: Robert E. Foxworthy, Bridgeport Township High School, Bridgeport

SOUTHERN: Alice Grant, Frankfort Community High School, West Frankfort

SOUTHWESTERN: Lloyd T. Carr, Jr., Alton Senior High School, Alton

WESTERN: Mrs. Adele Armstrong, 866 Crafford Street, Bushnell

As editor of your *Bulletin*, I want to thank all these persons for their co-operation through the year, and to thank also the contributors of articles and the teachers who submitted student writing for the poetry and prose issues. Miss Paulene M. Yates, Miss Emma Mae Leonhard, and Miss Maurine Self, as well as other teachers who aided them, deserve particular credit for their careful work in selecting student writings for these issues.

Finally, I should like to thank Mrs. Mary Kay Peer and Lois Wells and Carol Ann Underwood, in the English office at the University of Illinois. They fill orders for *Bulletins* and maps, answer numerous queries, cut stencils, and help in building membership—all this in addition to their work for the Department. They deserve the gratitude of all I.A.T.E. members.

J. N. HOOK, *Editor*